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SUBJECT: NIGERIA -- FORMER VP EKWUEME SAYS
PDP IN TURMOIL; PRESIDENTIAL RACE UNCLEAR

(U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F.JETER;
REASONS 1.5(B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During two meetings with the Ambassador in late July and mid-August, former civilian Vice President and current Chairman of the PDP Trustee Board Alex Ekwueme waxed about the danger of massive defections from the party due to President Obasanjo's waning popularity. As a result, the Trustees established a committee to assess Obasanjo's electoral chances. Ekwueme unconvincingly stated that he did not want to be in the running, but thought former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida would seek the UNPP's banner and would present a formidable challenge. Former Head of State Buhari, seeking the ANPP nomination, was popular in the Muslim North but had little appeal in other regions and had ostracized the Christian community by intemperate statements on religion. Perennial also-rans such as Umaru Shinkafi were not serious contenders, but were jockeying for Cabinet positions and other pay-offs. Ekwueme predicted that after a few more months of backroom bargaining more serious candidates would emerge and the real picture of the presidential contest would unfold. End Summary.

IRE IN THE PDP HOUSE

12. (C) As Chairman of the ruling PDP's Board of Trustees, Ekwueme should be looking forward to the upcoming elections. Instead, Ekwueme, in two separate meetings with the Ambassador in late July and mid-August respectively, related his discomfort with the disunity infecting his party. During their most recent meetings, the Trustees decried the internecine battles between the President and party leadership in the National Assembly and despaired over the violence and shameless cheating that characterized PDP local government primaries in July. Yet the biggest headache was President Obasanjo's sagging popularity and the President's now renowned tendentiousness which has alienated numbers of party members. Important people were prepared to leave the PDP and join other parties, particularly if Obasanjo attempted to hijack the nomination, Ekwueme said. Because of this intra-party power struggle and due to the growing perception that Obasanjo might be an electoral liability, the Board was forming a committee to study the Party's internal troubles, Ekwueme added.

13. (C) COMMENT: Preferring understatement and subtlety, the soft-spoken Ekwueme generally shuns blunt frankness. What he leaves between the lines is as important as what he says explicitly. Thus, things may be even worse than Ekwueme's description of the PDP misfortune. Clearly, Ekwueme holds Obasanjo largely responsible for the party's woes. Because of Obasanjo, the PDP may be courting a major decline in its electoral fortunes. With Obasanjo steadily sinking, Ekwueme and others do not want to be pulled down by or because of him. Consequently, the committee will assess damage done to the party by its self-inflicted internal conflicts. In reality, we have learned that the real motivation for the committee's

formation was to gauge Obasanjo's electoral prospects. The formation of the committee evinces a diffusion of power within the PDP and the democratic freedom to challenge the Head of State, a development unprecedented in Nigerian politics. However, it also says legions about the President's diminished political stature and the growing disenchantment of the PDP leadership with Obasanjo. End Comment.

14. (C) Continuing along this line, Obasanjo's re-nomination was not a fait accompli, Ekwueme told the Ambassador. Already there were four other contenders who had formally announced their bids for the PDP nomination. Ekwueme expected more people to contest for the PDP banner, but doubted the veracity of rumors that Vice President Atiku would leave the ticket to seek the nomination in his own right.

PRESIDENTIAL RACE -- THE PICTURE IS CLOUDY

15. (C) Looking outside the PDP, Ekwueme thought former Head of State Babangida was inching closer to a formal declaration. A long-term Babangida associate recently told Ekwueme that Babangida would run, Ekwueme confided to the Ambassador. Also, Babangida's men were busy purchasing vehicles and other equipment and materials in apparent preparation for mounting a campaign. He thought IBB would run under the banner of the UNPP, political home of numerous retired general officers, including Admiral Augustus Aikhomu, Babangida's military Vice-President and subsequent political front-man.

16. (C) Although IBB would probably run, Ekwueme believed, the former Head of State characteristically was keeping his options open. IBB was also still exploring the possibility of an Igbo candidate and a northern Vice Presidential running mate. Many more late night negotiating sessions and horse-trading would be required before a candidate emerged that could appeal to the different segments of the fragmented Igbo political elite.

17. (C) Being a former Vice President and a still widely respected figure, the urbane Ekwueme would fit the bill; however, he doubted Babangida would seek him out to forge common cause. After masterminding the coup that toppled Shagari and Ekwueme in 1983, and later using his political muscle and riches to snatch the PDP Presidential nomination from Ekwueme's grasp to hand it to Obasanjo in 1999, Babangida saw Ekwueme as an aggrieved adversary who might seek vengeance. While professing no ill will toward the former Head of State, Ekwueme thought IBB would always be wary of him. Instead, Babangida was looking at Igbos like Senator Ike Nwachukwu, a former general and Babangida's Foreign Minister.

18. (C) In the ANPP, former military strongman Muhammadu Buhari currently was the man to watch. However, Buhari's strident and divisive religious statements had made most Christians and many moderate Muslims cringe. While Buhari was popular with the young, poor and restive in the Muslim community, he could not pay one Northern Christian to vote for him, Ekwueme declared. Obasanjo benefited the longer Buhari, a regional and religious lightning rod, remained a serious candidate. Buhari would split the anti-Obasanjo vote in the North while forcing the Northern Christian and Southern vote, both anti-Christian and Muslim, to unite and gravitate to Obasanjo. Ekwueme did not consider other announced candidates such as perennial also-ran Umaru Shinkafi as

presidential timbre. He thought Shinkafi and others had entered the race in order to raise their visibility and leverage that visibility to gain Cabinet posts and/or other future pay-offs.

19. (C) While discussion of the relative strengths of Obasanjo, Babangida and Buhari was interesting, Ekwueme cautioned that the list of presidential candidates was not static. In Nigeria's political culture, presidential candidates emerge primarily from the closed door bargaining among the leaders of the political elite. The one who announces his candidacy early and publicly is rarely the one left standing when the backroom political trade-offs are over. The most serious candidates usually emerge later in the game. While Obasanjo and the two other former military Heads of State are the most serious names right now, Ekwueme predicted that the really formidable contenders among the civilian politicians would not emerge until December, when all of the political bartering has been done and the secret electoral compacts sealed.

110. (C) Although he felt Babangida would enter the UNPP, Ekwueme felt IBB's hand also was in the NDP and, to a lesser degree, the ANPP. He did not see IBB's hand in the APGA as others thought, but acknowledged that some of the APGA hierarchy made their fortunes during IBB's reign. Ekwueme was not surprised the APGA was registered as a national party by INEC even though parties fielded by more widely known politicians could not fulfill the geographic requirements of having field offices in 24 states. The APGA's ability to meet this requirement had little to do with manifest national character or being a party of ethnic diversity; instead, the APGA relied on the wide diffusion of Igbos throughout Nigeria. Igbos are in every state and you can find an Igbo trader in almost every village. Thus, the APGA simply used these Igbo outposts as the address for their field offices in the various states.

111. (C) Ekwueme stated that the larger number of opposition parties generally favored the PDP and Obasanjo. He predicted that an integral part of Obasanjo's political strategy would be to clandestinely promote minor opposition candidates in order to prevent a unified opposition around one candidate.

112. (C) Asked when the PDP convention would occur, Ekwueme thought it would not take place in October as originally slated. He noted that the National Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees had to finalize the guidelines for the party primaries for the state and national offices and for the election of delegates to the primaries prior to establishing the date for the convention. Therefore, it was highly unlikely that the convention would take place before December.

113. (C) Ekwueme lamented the confused status of the local government elections, saying that the machinations that have delayed them set a discordant, unfortunate precedent for the state and national polls ahead. He remembered the PDP trustees had advised Obasanjo last year that he would rue the decision to extend the tenure of the local government councils. However, Obasanjo was fixated on having his own independent political constituency by making sure the PDP could take the local governments in his home state away from the Yoruba-dominated Alliance for Democracy (AD). Obasanjo thought he could accomplish this feat if given more time, but he was wrong. Now, with his popularity dramatically declining, the President is afraid of holding local elections prior to the party convention. He does not want to limp into the convention

having again lost his local government area and with the PDP possibly suffering a net loss nationwide. That would be the closest thing to a vote of no confidence that would make the convention an untidy, and open affair. Thus, Ekwueme predicted that local government elections would not hold until a month after the PDP convention.

14. (C) While he could not completely mask his ambition, Ekwueme disclaimed any intention to seek the presidency. He said that he would be abroad, and thus out of the picture, most of August and September when much of the horse-trading would be done.

COMMENT

15. (C) The exceptionally intelligent and experienced Ekwueme may have been a bit disingenuous regarding his own ambitions. He has come close before and clearly he thinks he can do a better job than the man currently at the helm. Yet, Ekwueme is caught in the bind of being in the same party as Obasanjo. If he openly attacked Obasanjo, he would be accused of disloyalty and seeking self-vindication. However, Ekwueme would not mind too much should others continue fustigating the President. By absenting himself during this potential gathering storm within the PDP, he can watch on the sidelines as things unfold, thus averting blame from Obasanjo's friends and foes. While a longshot, Ekwueme is probably trying to position himself as an elder statesman who could reconcile both camps in the party should Obasanjo's renomination bid fail. Given the fluidity and unpredictability of Nigerian politics, Ekwueme could indeed be a political dark horse; certainly, he would serve, if called.

15. (C) Ekwueme's views on the rest of the Presidential candidates are insightful. While Obasanjo, Babangida and Buhari are the big three now, it is almost inevitable that other names will emerge who will be serious contenders. We are hearing this refrain more and more.
JETER